For Immediate Release
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SENATE UNANIMOUSLY APPROVES
SWEEPING MINE SAFETY REFORM BILL

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, and Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), the Committee's Ranking Member, today praised the Senate's swift action to approve the first major overhaul to mine safety in 28 years, by creating regulations to reflect a 21st Century world and reducing safety risks for miners across the country in response to recent mining tragedies.

The legislation, the "Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response Act of 2006" (MINER Act), S. 2803, was approved unanimously and originally cosponsored by Senator Kennedy, Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), Employment and Workplace Safety Subcommittee Chairman Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA), the Subcommittee's Ranking Member Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA), and Senator Mike DeWine (R-OH).

"This year our nation has experienced tragic losses in the coal mines of West Virginia and Kentucky," Enzi said. "In passing the bill unanimously, the Senate has shown its commitment to ensuring that such tragedies will not be repeated. I urge the House to do the same by acting quickly on this important issue, so that we can send it to the President's desk for his signature."

Senator Kennedy said: "Mining is one of the most dangerous jobs in the nation, and those who take these risks deserve to be as safe and healthy as possible. The bill is an overdue attempt to produce a much greater commitment to safety in the industry. I urge the House to move quickly to approve these much-needed reforms so they can be implemented as soon as possible."

"As Chairman of the HELP Committee, I am deeply grateful for the cooperation and support of my distinguished cosponsors on this bill who have worked tirelessly to make this bill a reality," Enzi added.

Key provisions of the "MINER Act" will:

- Require each covered mine to develop and continuously update a written emergency response plan;

- Promote use of equipment and technology that is currently commercially available;

- Require each mine's emergency response plan to be continuously reviewed, updated and re-certified by MSHA every six months;

- Direct the Secretary of Labor to require wireless two-way communications and an electronic tracking system within three years, permitting those on the surface to locate persons trapped underground;

- Require each mine to make available two experienced rescue teams capable of a one hour response time;

- Require mine operators to make notification of all incidents/accidents which pose a reasonable risk of death within 15 minutes, and sets a civil penalty of $5,000 to $60,000 for mine operators who fail to do so;

- Establish a competitive grant program for new mine safety technology to be administered by NIOSH;

- Establish an interagency working group to provide a formal means of sharing non-classified technology that would have applicability to mine safety;

- Raise the criminal penalty cap to $250,000 for first offenses and $500,000 for second offenses, as well as raise the maximum civil penalty for flagrant violations to $220,000;

- Give MSHA the power to request an injunction (shutting down a mine) in cases where the mine has refused to pay a final order MSHA penalty;

- Create a scholarship program available to miners and those who wish to become miners and MSHA enforcement staff to head off an anticipated shortage in trained and experienced miners and MSHA enforcement;

- Establish the Brookwood-Sago Mine Safety Grants program to provide training grants to better identify, avoid and prevent unsafe working conditions in and around the mines. These grants will be made on an annual, competitive basis to provide education and training for employers and miners, with a special emphasis on smaller mines.

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